

# Freedom Soon for the Baltics

Their impatience is understandable. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have endured a half-century of occupation. Yet now, independence talks with Moscow still drag on, more than a year after the Soviet Union acknowledged the wrongfulness of the shady deal with Hitler that put these countries under Stalin's thumb.

The world, once exercised on their behalf, has been distracted. That's apt to tempt Moscow hard-liners to think they can keep the Baltic republics caged indefinitely. And nationalist hotheads might be driven to try stirring world sympathy by challenging Moscow's troops. Hard-liners and hotheads alike would be dangerously misguided.

The only way for Moscow to deal justly with the Baltics is through dialogue, a process the United States can encourage — perhaps even today, when President Bush meets with President Landsbergis of Lithuania and Secretary of State Baker hosts Foreign Minister Shevardnadze of the Soviet Union.

The three wronged republics have no interest in Mikhail Gorbachev's monumental problems of holding the Soviet Union together. They are asserting their own independence, singing long-suppressed folk songs, issuing stamps and currency, setting up their own customs posts and refusing to participate in the new Federation Council.

What has most offended Moscow, however, is

their attempt to free themselves from the annual budget that still governs the Soviet economy. Moscow warned of economic reprisal. And when the Riga regional council in Latvia voted to cancel food deliveries to Red Army installations, Defense Minister Yazov threatened to use force.

Even if Mr. Gorbachev acknowledges that the Baltic states have a strong claim to independence, there is a problem of precedent. Radicals in other republics also want to break free. Leaders in all those republics except Georgia want more powers from Moscow, arguing that sovereignty will satisfy all but the secessionists. Granting the Baltics full independence might undercut these leaders and make Mr. Gorbachev's efforts to renegotiate union ties meaningless.

Mr. Gorbachev seems to believe that most Soviet citizens prefer crackdown to chaos. And he's betting that independence movements will eventually lose steam. But in the Baltics, the evidence cries out to the contrary.

The U.S. cannot sensibly lecture Mr. Gorbachev on exactly how fast he should permit these three indomitable nations to regain their independence. But even if Americans cannot insist on freedom now, they can — starting with President Bush — reaffirm support for good-faith talks that promise freedom soon.